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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA ELECTIONS: SMALLER PARTIES REPORT

DISCRIMINATION BUT NO MAJOR INCIDENTS

REF: PHNOM PENH 554

¶1. (SBU) Summary: While the ruling and main opposition parties vie for ground in the public spotlight during the month-long campaign period before Cambodia's July 27 National Assembly elections, the country's lesser-known parties are seeking votes without much ado. Smaller party representatives have generally stated that they have not experienced major obstacles or incidents during the pre-election period. Some experienced difficulties in registering for the elections in May 2008. While they would prefer a more level playing field compared to the ruling Cambodian People's Party's advantages, these smaller parties persevere despite what may be a bleak outlook for capturing parliamentary seats. Some of the smaller parties stated that they have strategies to concentrate their efforts in a few areas instead of on a nationwide campaign; many have parliamentary candidates on the National Election Committee lists for nearly all provinces. End Summary.

Small Parties Report Some Campaign Period Problems

¶2. (SBU) Cambodia's smaller, lesser-known political parties have reported some incidents of discrimination towards their parties or members during the run-up to the July 27 National Assembly elections, but they also report that the campaign period has been peaceful. Before the official campaign season began on June 26, the Hang Dara Democratic Movement Party (HDP) reported that some of its new members had been refused administrative documents by local commune council members. However, since the campaign period has begun, the HDP stated that they have not received reports of intimidation or violence towards their members.

¶3. (SBU) The Society of Justice Party (SJP) reported that some of their party signs have been torn, but stated that they have not submitted official complaints. Prior to the official campaign period, the SJP reported two different incidents in two Battambang communes where local commune council members hassled SJP members when they went to put up SJP party signs. In the end, both signs went up. The Khmer Democratic Party (KDP) reported that during a campaign rally in Kandal province, the party attempted to erect a party sign near an existing CPP sign. Before they could finish the job, local CPP commune council members arrived at the site and told the KDP members that they could not put up the sign. The KDP reported that the party did not want to provoke problems, so they erected the sign elsewhere and did not officially report the incident. (Note: In general, placement of multiple signs in most locations has not been reported as a problem in this election campaign. End Note.) The smaller parties, including the League for Democracy Party (LDP), reported that the official June 26 to July 25 campaign period has otherwise been peaceful and without incident.

Playing Field Not Level

¶ 14. (SBU) During a meeting with Emboffs, SJP members were vocal about what they consider to be an unfair playing field for parties other than the ruling CPP. SJP President and former FUNCINPEC Deputy Governor of Battambang province Ban Sophal claimed that CPP members have taken national property to serve their own interests, such as using government vehicles and/or government-purchased fuel for personal or party related travel to the provinces. He also stated that the CPP is advantaged by being able to use national radio and television outlets to regularly broadcast information about the party and incumbent achievements, mainly outside the official campaign period because such abuses are curtailed during the campaign period. HDP party members also told Emboffs that they perceive the media playing field to be uneven because CPP supporters control many of the media outlets in Cambodia.

¶ 15. (SBU) KDP representatives reported that their party takes an openly neutral stance towards both the CPP and SRP. Some HDP party members have reported that there have been incidents when they have had problems within their villages and go to the commune council for help, council members have turned HDP members away, asking the HDP individuals why they don't go to their own party for help instead. One HDP representative also stated his perception that in areas where many villagers belong to a party other than the CPP, government authorities have not developed that area by improving infrastructure. He did not provide an example where that was the case.

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Difficulties Registering Parties in May 2008

¶ 16. (SBU) Some of Cambodia's smaller parties seem to have hit their biggest snags during the April 28 to May 12 registration period when parties were required to submit candidate lists to the NEC to be considered contenders for the July 27 National Assembly elections. According to the Cambodian election law, political parties must submit to the NEC a list of candidates throughout the country, with a number of candidates that is equal to at least one-third of the seats in the National Assembly -- currently 123 -- plus one alternate candidate for each titular candidate. A candidate list could be as short as 82 names, including alternate candidates. The law requires that all candidates be registered voters. The HDP, KDP, LDP, SJP, and the United People's Party (UPP) each reported to Emboffs that they had names on their candidate lists rejected by the NEC because the rejected names did not appear on NEC voter registration lists. The Cambodian-American leader of the Khmer Republican Party (KRP) admitted to Emboff that he submitted invalid names because of poor preparation by his advisors. When Emboffs met with the KDP on May 19, they reported that they had submitted 286 names to the NEC, 33 of those names were rejected, and the party was seeking to replace the 33 candidate names. The HDP, LDP, and SJP faced similar problems during the party registration period. Despite what appeared to be unnecessary delays, excessive bureaucracy, and clearly inadequate service at the commune level, the five parties were finally successful in registering their candidate names.

United People's Party Not Successful in Registering

¶ 17. (SBU) The UPP was not successful in replacing their rejected names and is out of the National Assembly seat running. The UPP had initially submitted 105 candidate names, 25 of which were rejected. The UPP requested permission from the NEC to reduce their total number of candidate names, meaning that they requested not to replace

all 25 names on their list. As a compromise, the NEC gave the party 10 additional days after the final party registration date on May 12 to submit 25 new names. The UPP decided to take their request to the Constitutional Council, and the UPP claims that it also submitted 25 new names to the Constitutional Council. In the end, the Constitutional Council decided against the UPP, and the party was not eligible to run for National Assembly seats.

Small Parties -- What Are Their Chances?

¶ 8. (SBU) Among the HDP, KDP, LDP and SJP, only the Hang Dara Democratic Movement Party won a 2007 commune council seat -- a second deputy commune council chief position in Sitoh commune of Kandal province. The HDP was established in 2002 by Hang Dara, a former Royalist and member of the opposition to the Vietnamese occupation after January 1979; he was a FUNCINPEC member from 1993 to 2002. After running for a National Assembly seat under his namesake party in 2003, and losing, he became a Buddhist monk. The party leadership told Emboffs they have an estimated 200,000 activists for the party, most in Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, Kandal, Prey Veng, and Takeo provinces. They expect they will receive 80,000 votes during the July 27 elections.

¶ 9. (SBU) The Khmer Democratic Party won one 2002 commune council position and during the 2007 commune council election won 7,685 votes but not a seat. KDP candidates ran for National Assembly seats in the 1998 and 2003 elections without success. The party will focus in Kampong Cham this election.

¶ 10. (SBU) The League for Democracy Party is affiliated with a local NGO that runs a radio program called "The Sound of the Bell" that broadcasts the party's political platform. The LDP states that the NGO also conducts public forums two to three times per month during which the party publicizes its proposals, seeks members, and collects donations - the LDP told Emboffs that it collects about USD 200 per public forum. In 2007, LDP candidates ran for commune council positions in 25 communes across six provinces and reportedly received somewhere between 80-100 votes.

¶ 11. (SBU) The Society of Justice Party was established two years ago by Ban Sophal, a former FUNCINPEC deputy governor

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of Battambang province where the party believes most of its 7,000-plus supporters reside. The party did not have candidates running in the 2007 commune council election.

¶ 12. (SBU) The Khmer Anti-Poverty Party (KAPP) was created last year by Daran Kravanh, a Cambodian-American former refugee who did well as an official in the Washington State social welfare agency. He says that he now wants to give back to Cambodia. Kravanh's Khmer Rouge survival story was told in a moving account written by his wife Bree Lafreniere and published by the University of Hawaii Press. In the televised political party round-tables on state-run TVK, Kravanh has shown himself to be an able public speaker who can at least keep a Cambodian audience. His emphasis on rule of law, fighting corruption, and developing Cambodia out of its current level of poverty has registered well with some voters but his voter base is relatively small in Kampong Speu, Pursat, Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces. He has worked closely over the years with a group of non-denominational Christian churches in Cambodia and some of these adherents help to cultivate support. In an arrangement with the Social Justice Party, Kravanh has agreed to advocate his voters support SJP in Battambang, while SJP is supposed to push for KAPP's support in provinces like Kampong Speu and Kampong Cham.

¶ 13. (SBU) The Khmer Republican Party (KRP) is the brainchild of Lon Rith, another Cambodian-American and the son of Lon

Nol, the U.S.-backed Cambodian premier in 1970-1975. Lon Rith returned briefly in the fall of 2007 to formally anoint the party, established in 2005, but failed to register as a voter and so cannot run as a candidate in his party. He returned to Cambodia again in June. He finds most of his support among his father's former political base, avid Republicans who had been unhappy with Sihanouk's rule and who have always embraced America. However, having left Cambodia at the age of 12, Lon Rith is a halting Khmer speaker and cannot read Khmer. His public speaking performances do not appear to attract many voters. The KRP seems to be strongest in pockets of Phnom Penh, parts of provinces bordering Vietnam, and Battambang. Lon Rith has expressed strong views against the Vietnamese, but not as stridently as the government under his father, which had devastating results (including massacres of Vietnamese civilian populations during the early 1970's). Lon Rith is also looking for support from Khmer Kampuchea Krom voters.

Illegal Immigration a Hot Issue Among Small Parties

¶14. (SBU) The HDP, KDP, LDP, KRP and SJP have mostly predictable party platforms such as fighting corruption, and promotion of democracy. A common (and popular) platform issue across the five parties is illegal immigration -- during meetings with party representatives, most referred to immigrants from Vietnam as problematic. HDP members told Emboffs that they believe many parties focus on illegal immigrants from Vietnam because people perceive Vietnamese immigrants as illegally obtaining documents to vote, and that they vote for the ruling CPP. One HDP representative also stated his belief that Cambodians worry that Vietnamese people will "take over" Cambodia.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) During recent pre-election monitoring visits to various provinces, Emboffs have seen some campaign signs of the smaller parties along major roads, and even along stretches of a few dirt roads in more remote villages. Emboffs stopped to chat with a small kiosk owner along a dusty stretch of road surrounded by rice paddies in Prey Veng province. An HDP sign was posted a few feet away. When asked if people in the village had problems posting any party signs she said that people in her village were not pressured to put up any particular signs. However, there were vastly fewer small party signs than those of the CPP -- a party that appears to be well-organized in its campaigning in the provinces -- and the better-known opposition parties such as the Sam Rainsy Party and the Norodom Ranariddh Party. The low-key campaigning by the smaller parties, and their probable minimal chances at winning parliamentary seats this year, has likely helped draw less attention to them as rivals by the organized ruling party.

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